

From Chapter Two

“Don’t these books make your purse really heavy? There’s gotta be some app where you can store all this information.”

“Studies show you’re more likely to remember things you’ve written by hand, with physical pen and paper.” She reached across my lap and opened the glove compartment, removing a notebook with an antiqued photograph of a vintage luxury car printed on the cover. “For example, this is my auto maintenance log. Maybe if you’d kept one of these, like I told you to, we wouldn’t be in this predicament right now.”

I loved Natasha, I really did. She was responsible and generous, and without her I’d likely be far worse off than I already was, which was a horrifying thought to consider. But at times like this, I wanted to grab her by the shoulders and shake the shit out of her.

“A maintenance log wouldn’t have helped me.”

“Yes, it would have. Organization is about more than decluttering your home. It’s about decluttering your mind. Making lists, keeping records—these are all ways to help you get your life in order. If you’d had a maintenance log, this problem wouldn’t have caught you off guard in the middle of your delivery shift. You’d have seen it coming, and—”

“I saw it coming.”

“What?”

“This didn’t catch me off guard. The check engine light came on two weeks ago.” *Or maybe it was three.*

“Then why didn’t you take it to the mechanic?” She blinked, genuinely confused. Everything was so cut-and-dried with her. When a car needed to be serviced, of course you called the mechanic.

That is, if you could afford to pay the repair bill.

Fortunately, she put two and two together without making me say it out loud. “Oh,” she murmured, then bit her lip. I could almost hear the squeak and clank of wheels turning in her head as she tried to piece together the solution to this problem. No doubt it included me setting up a journal or logbook of some sort, though we both knew that would be pointless. The last time she’d tried to set me up with a weekly budget planner, I gave up on day two, when I realized I could GrubGetter around the clock for the rest of my life and still never make enough money to get current on the payments for my student loans. You know, for that degree I’d never finished.

But Natasha was a determined problem solver. It said so in her business bio: “Natasha DeAngelis, Certified Professional Organizer®, is a determined problem solver with a passion for sorting, purging, arranging, and containerizing.” My life was a perpetual mess, and though she couldn’t seem to be able to clean it up, that didn’t stop her from trying. Over and over and over again.

“I’ll pay for the repairs,” she said.

“No.” I shook my head, fending off the very big part of me that wanted to say yes. “I can’t take any money from you.”

"It's fine," she said. "Business is booming. I've got so much work right now that I've actually had to turn clients away. And ever since Al introduced that new accelerated orthodontic treatment, his office has been raking it in. We can afford to help you."

"I know." Obviously, my sister and her family weren't hurting for cash. Aside from her wildly successful organizing business, her husband, Al, ran his own orthodontics practice. They owned a four-bedroom house, leased luxury cars, and took triannual vacations to warm, sunny places like Maui and Tulum. They had a smart fridge in their kitchen that was undoubtedly worth more than my nonfunctioning car.

But my sister wasn't a safety net, and I needed to stop treating her like one. She'd already done so much for me. More than any big sister should ever have to do.

"I just can't," I said.

"Well, do you really have any other choice?" There was an edge to Natasha's voice now. "If you don't have a car, how are you going to work?"

"I'll figure something out." The words didn't sound very convincing, even to my own ears. For the past four years, all I'd done was deliver food. I had no other marketable skills, no references, no degree.

I was a massive failure.

Tears pooled in my eyes. Natasha sighed again.

"Look," she said, "maybe it's time to admit you need to come up with a solid plan for your life. You've been in a downward spiral ever since Rob left."

She had a point. I'd never been particularly stable, but things got a whole lot worse seven months earlier, when my live-in ex-boyfriend, Rob, had abruptly announced he was ending our three-year relationship, quitting his job, and embarking on an immersive ayahuasca retreat in the depths of the Peruvian Amazon.

"I've lost my way," he'd said, his eyes bloodshot from too many hits on his vape pen. "The Divine Mother Shakti at the Temple of Eternal Light can help me find myself again."

"What?" I'd been incredulous. "Where is this coming from?"

He'd unearthed a book from beneath a pile of dirty clothes on our bed and handed it to me—*Psychedelic Healers: An Exploratory Journey of the Soul*, by Shakti Rebecca Rubinstein.

"What is this?"

"It's the book that changed my life," he'd said. "I'm ready for deep growth. New energy."

Then he'd moved his belongings to a storage unit off the side of the I-8, and left me to pay the full cost of our monthly rent and utilities on my paltry GrubGetter income.

I told myself this situation was only temporary, that Rob would return as soon as he realized that hallucinating in the rainforest wasn't going to lead him to some higher consciousness. But I hadn't

heard from him since he took off on that direct flight from LAX to Lima. At this point, it was probably safe to assume he was never coming back.

Which was probably for the best. It's not exactly like Rob was Prince Charming or anything. But being with him was better than being alone. At least I'd had someone to split the bills with.

"Honestly," she continued, "I can't stand to see you so miserable anymore. Happiness is a choice, Bree. Choose happy."

Of all Natasha's pithy sayings, "Choose happy" was the one I hated most. It was printed on the back of her business cards in faux brush lettering, silently accusing each potential client of being complicit in their own misery. If they paid her to clean out their closets, though, they could apparently experience unparalleled joy.

"That's bullshit, and you know it."

She scowled. "It is not."

"It is, actually. Shitty things happen all the time and we have no choice in the matter. I didn't choose to be too broke to fix my car. I work really hard, but this job doesn't pay well. And I didn't choose for Rob to abandon me to go find himself in the Amazon, either. He made that choice for us."

I almost mentioned the shittiest thing that had ever happened to Natasha or to me, a thing neither of us had chosen. But I stopped myself before the words rolled off my lips. This evening was bad enough without rehashing the details of our mother's death.

"Sometimes things happen to us that are beyond our control," Natasha said, her voice infuriatingly calm. "But we can control how we react to it. Focus on what you can control. And it does no good to dwell on the past, either. Don't look back, Bree—"

"Because that's not where you're going. Yes, I know. You've said that before." *About a thousand times.*

She took a deep breath, most likely to prepare for a lengthy lecture on why it's important to stay positive and productive in the face of adversity, but then a large tow truck lumbered onto the cul-de-sac and she got out of the car to flag him down.

Grateful for the interruption, I ditched the casserole on her dashboard and walked over to where the driver had double-parked alongside my car.

"What's the problem?" he asked, hopping down from the cab.

"It won't start," I said, to which Natasha quickly followed up with, "The check engine light came on several weeks ago, but the car has not been serviced yet."

He grunted and popped the hood, one thick filthy hand stroking his braided beard as he surveyed the engine. Another grunt, then he asked for the keys and tried to start it, only to hear the same sad click and whine as before.

"It's not the battery." He leaned his head out of the open door. "When was the last time you changed your timing belt?"

“Uh... I don’t know.”

Natasha shook her head and mouthed, *Maintenance log!* in my direction but I pretended not to see.

The driver got out and slammed the hood shut. “Well, this thing is hosed.”

“Hosed?” My heart thrummed in my chest. “What does that mean? It can’t be fixed?”

He shrugged, clearly indifferent to my crisis-in-progress. “Can’t say for sure. Your mechanic can take a closer look and let you know. Where do you want me to tow it?”

I pulled out my phone to look up the address of the mechanic near my apartment down in Pacific Beach. But Natasha answered before I could google it up.

“Just take it to Encinitas Auto Repair,” she said. “It’s on Second and F.”

“You got it,” he said, then retreated to his truck to fiddle with some chains.

Natasha avoided my gaze. Instead, she focused on calling a guy named Jerry, who presumably worked at this repair shop, and told him to expect “a really old Civic that’s in rough shape,” making sure to specify, “It’s not mine, it’s my sister’s.”

I knew she was going to pay for the repairs. It made me feel icky, taking yet another handout from my big sister. But ultimately, she was right. What other choice did I have?

The two of us stayed quiet while the driver finished hooking up my car. After he’d towed it away down the cul-desac and out of sight, Natasha turned to me. “Do you want to come over? Izzy’s got piano lessons in fifteen minutes, you can hear how good she is now.”

Even though I did miss my niece, there was nothing I wanted to do more than go home, tear off these smelly clothes, and cry in solitude. “I’ll take a rain check. Thanks again for coming to get me.”

“Of course.” She started poking at her phone screen. A moment later, she said, “Your Lyft will be here in four minutes. His name is Neil. He drives a black Sentra.” A quick kiss on my cheek and she was hustling back to her SUV.

As I watched Natasha drive away, I wished—not for the first time—that I could be more like her: competent, organized, confident enough in my choices to believe I could choose to be happy. Sometimes I felt like she had twenty years on me, instead of only six. So maybe instead of complaining, I should’ve started taking her advice.

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